



Once upon a time, and the worst of times it was, when the world was full of jabberwockies and trolls, when it only took a smile of kindness from the girl at the supermarket checkout to bring tears to just behind my eyes, something special happened.

On Boxing Day 1993 the world, as I knew it to be, ended, and another world came into being.

In the early summer of 1994, I was in Coleraine, my home town. The sun was shining and I had a sickness in my stomach, on my way to an appointment with a solicitor. To the other world I was a middle aged, middle class, prosperous man in a grey Prince of Wales check, double breasted suit, blue shirt, red tie, with not a care in that world. In the world I now inhabited, with so many others, the heart was broken and the will to go on was faltering. Fantasies of suicide dominated my thoughts, not to make my life go away, but to make the pain go away. But I had two children to care for and so I pretended to go on.

Across the street in New Row was the office of the Coleraine Chronicle newspaper. In the window I could see a display of photographs. I crossed over, and there, somewhere in the

middle of the window, was the photograph. I was startled; the turned head, the sideways glance, the direct eyes, the furrowed brow, the host of black turned shapeless backs.

What was she saying to me? What did I want to hear?

“Don’t worry; it will be alright.”

“I understand.”

“Don’t stop. Keep going.”

“I can see your tears.”

“Help me. I am hurting too.”

I pushed the office door open. A little bell tinkled from another time. It felt safe there; old fashioned, the smell of dust and ghosts, the murmur of old voices. I ordered a copy of the photograph to be posted home; no longer a home. Again, as I left I stopped and looked at her. What are you trying to tell me? I turned and walked away to face the trolls and jabberwockies.

A few years later I saw her again, not in a photograph. This time it was in the Patan Durbar Square in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The square is a wonderland of temples and shrines; not a shop or a MacDonald’s in sight. As I, my friend and our driver walked around it, from a street in one corner, came a process of Buddhist monks, four or five abreast, walking slowly, in saffron robes, shaved heads, threading their way between the temples and the shrines. They walked right past us, line after line, in a long, loose formation; a river of bright orange yellow.

Near the end, in the middle of a line, was a white Caucasian woman, the saffron robe covering her greying hair. She turned to look at me and our eyes locked, for a long enough second, to know that something was being said.

The procession passed, we walked on, I turned and looked back; she turned and looked back, again eyes meeting.

“Don’t worry, it will be OK.”

“I understand.”

“It’s a long road. Go safely and peacefully.”

It was the same woman, everywoman.